The Roots of California Surf Music and Culture

In continued exploration of the cultural roots of popular music in the United States, these two thirty-minute lessons have been developed by a team of experts for use in conjunction with unit lessons in Mapping the Beat: A Geography through Music Curriculum suitable for Eleventh Grade.

• Concept
This lesson examines how the roots of surf music in California formed and flourished in the 1950s and 1960s and how surf music and culture continued to develop and adapt through the subsequent decades. Topics include a discussion of how the instruments, songs, melodies, and rhythms of immigrants to Southern California combined with the rise of Rock & Roll and other distinctive American music influenced regional music and culture.

• Objective
To recognize well-known musicians, their influences and distinguishing characteristics of Californian surf music such as how artists use melody, rhythm, and imagery evoked through music and lyrics, and finally relate how the early musicians continue to influence modern artists today.

• Standards Addressed

11th Grade History-Social Science

> Standard 11.8.8. Discuss forms of popular culture, with emphasis on their origins and geographic diffusion (e.g., jazz and other forms of popular music, professional sports, architectural and artistic styles).

11th & 12th Grade English/Language Arts

> Reading Standard 3.4. Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers’ emotions.

9th-12th Grade Music (Proficient)

> Standard 3.1. Identify the sources of musical genres of the United States, trace the evolution of those genres, and cite well-known musicians associated with them.

> Standard 4.3. Explain how people in a particular culture use and respond to specific musical works from that culture.

> Standard 4.4. Describe the means used to create images or evoke feelings and emotions in musical works from various cultures.
Lesson 1

25 min Lecture/Discussion

Iconic California surf musicians of the 1960s created a wave of influence on rock n’ roll and popular music across the country. The growing popularity of rock n’ roll fueled their music as the sound of the people, intended to inspire and express the seemingly collective desire for independence and that drive to catch the biggest wave. This music took two forms simultaneously, both developing in Southern California. One was instrumental surf rock, with a guitar playing the lead line (melody) as with such musicians as Dick Dale, known as the “King of the Surf Guitar.” The second form was songs about surfing, in particular vocal surf pop introduced by The Beach Boys and Jan & Dean. While sound could provide the imagery of a wave coming crashing down or the sound of a surfer’s “Wipeout” as The Surfaris were so craftily able to create, lyrics now provided an added means of expression. In addition to providing an overview of the music and artists associated with this genre, this lesson intends to discuss the evolution of surf music as a legitimate musical genre of the United States and explore how the songs helped fuel the cultural climate.

- Pose the question: What is Surf Music? What characteristics, images, song titles, artists, etc come to mind? List answers on the board. Ask “Is surf music distinctly American? In other words, did it originate here? Did surfing originate here? How do you think surfing itself and its historical trends might have affected music?
- Ask the students to listen to the following musical example and describe what they hear. Play an example of Hawaiian music: Explain: when I first asked you what surf music is, is this what you expected to hear? Is this surf music? Can you identify any of the instruments being played? Where do you think this music was composed?
- Using the vocabulary list and diagrams provided guide students in identifying two key instruments in the development of mainstream surf music:
  a. The ‘Ukulele [Appendix A]
  b. The Steel Guitar [Appendix B]
- Now have the students listen to three versions of the same song and describe their differences:
  1. Miserlou by Bruce Shimabukuro (CD: Legends of the Ukulele 2: Hawaiian Masters) [http://www.hawaiianmusicstore.com/beach/72505.mp3]
  2. Miserlou played on the steel guitar [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al-ld8YKU4A]
  3. Miserlou by Dick Dale [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9rg2uP_xXk].

- Read from Surfin’ Guitars by Robert Dalley:

  Instrumental surf music was a unique style of music that first appeared in the early sixties. What made it unique was that it developed around the culture and language of the sport of surfing. The music was an attempt on the part of the musician to convey the feeling and rhythm of surfing to others through the music. Although this music was mostly a regional phenomenon centered on the West Coast of Southern California, it’s presence was felt worldwide where instrumental music knew no language barriers. Dick Dale [known as the King of the Surf Guitar] is credited with introducing this style of music and though there [are
people who might disagree with that]. Whatever the opinion is, Dick Dale seemed to get things started with “Let’s Go Trippin’” released in 1961. It was Dick Dale who influenced many local artists and groups.

- Play Dick Dale’s “Let’s Go Trippin’”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1gskj1VQR0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1gskj1VQR0)
- Listen/Discuss how “Let’s Go Trippin’” influenced the following artists/songs:
  1. The Surfaris “Wipe Out”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG2nat70MbY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG2nat70MbY)
  2. The Beach Boys “Surfin’ Safari”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS7SUFRz36l](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS7SUFRz36l)
- Guide the students toward listing similarities they notice in the repetitive melodies, rhythms, instruments used, characteristics, emotions expressed, etc.

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**5 min Wrap Up**

- **Review Questions:**
  1. Who was the artist known as the King of the Surf Guitar?
  2. What is the title of The Surfaris hit song?
  3. How many strings are on a standard ‘ukulele?
  4. What is the name of the group most commonly associated with vocal surf pop?

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Lesson 2

10 min Continued Lecture

• Provide continued listening examples of surf music so as to expose the class to additional surf musicians. Pause to open up for discussion of each piece, taking note of when students begin to more quickly recognize characteristics of particular artists.

10 min Activity

• Pass out the activity sheet [Appendix C]. Play the first fifteen seconds of at least ten random audio samples and have students try to identify the musician and describe the key characteristics which helped them determine the artist.

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoLMLFz2Hg8&feature=related
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7c2ZKamzS4
3. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxMyFe81FUG
4. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9rg2uP_xXk
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElvEEPXUrRY
6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wlgskj1VQR0
7. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG2nafl70MbY
8. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7f9hsFrKUY
10. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6M6kd8cmpI&feature=related

5 min Connections Section
(How is the history and music of this lesson relative to the present day?)

Although the popularity of surf music has dwindled, its influence can still be heard in the music of some contemporary musicians and bands including Blondie and the Ramones, and The Go-Go’s. There are also a number of current singer/songwriters pioneering a new era of surf music.

Play samples of contemporary surf music:

• Tristan Prettyman “Love, Love, Love” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNPP-sYv01M
• Donavan Frankenreiter “Lovely Day” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rLbFOMurCY
• Jack Johnson “Sitting, Waiting, Wishing” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ffgsf3pqAD8
• Ka’au Crater Boys “Surf” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlIgoKb66uQ
Discuss the similarities/differences between these contemporary pieces and the early surf music. Ask students to create a list of other contemporary singer/songwriters or bands that they know of who also share characteristics or could have possibly been influenced by early surf musicians.

**Assessment**

Students should be able to identify well-known musicians associated with the rise of surf music and distinguish the sound and characteristics of that music including identifying instruments, rhythms, and melodies of early Californian surf music. Students should also be able to describe how people in the culture used and responded to this music through melody, rhythm, and imagery evoked through instruments and/or vocals, and finally relate how the early musicians continue to influence modern artists today.
Appendix A

The ‘Ukulele
Appendix B

Pedal Steel Guitar

Lap Steel Guitar
Appendix C

Listen to the ten examples of surf music provided by your instructor. Choose five and indicate to the best of your ability, which artist recorded the example. Provide at least three specific rational for your choice in the space below.

Example #____ Artist ____________________________________________
Describe what makes this piece characteristic of the artist above:

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